

# Dangerous Objects: Changing Indigenous Perceptions of Material Culture in a Papua New Guinea Society<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In this article I examine the ways that the Maisin people of Oro Province in Papua New Guinea have understood and deployed objects of their material culture over the course of a century of interactions with European outsiders. In the early years of the twentieth century, an Anglican missionary noted local attitudes toward certain significant objects. Some of these objects likely became part of a large collection he made for the Australian Museum. I compare his observations with my own, made in the course of ethnographic fieldwork some 70 years later. The comparison shows that Maisin during both periods identified certain objects as emblems of kinship identity and others as dangerous, as materials for sorcery. However, Maisin attitudes toward these and other objects have been strongly influenced over the decades through encounters and dialogues with outsiders, particularly missionaries in the past and, more recently, environmentalists and museum curators.

**OBJECTS CAN KILL.** Three months into my fieldwork with the Maisin of Papua New Guinea, I came across the odd sight of an old drum hanging from a tree behind one of the village houses. I learned that a year or so earlier the owner of the drum had been publicly accused of using it to contact the spirit of a dead shaman (the former owner) to ensorcel his own wife. Protesting his innocence, he gave the drum to the son of the deceased shaman—himself a retired mission teacher—who, unwilling to handle the object himself, hung it in a tree to rot away. When I saw it, the drum had become blackened and cracked. But people clearly feared it. Although the drum was in itself nothing special, its connection to the shaman gave it historical significance, because he had been well known to

the colonial authorities of the 1930s (Barker 1990). I offered to arrange for it to be sent to the National Museum of Papua New Guinea. The son eagerly accepted my offer to get the drum away, but insisted upon secrecy. It was brought to me late at night, tightly wrapped. I sent it on to the National Museum with a letter of explanation. There it remains to this day.

My experience echoes that of an earlier resident among the Maisin. In 1902, an Anglican lay missionary, John Percy Money, built the first church and school at the largest Maisin village of Uiaku. In March 1903, a group of villagers responded to the urgings of one of the mission teachers, a Solomon Islander named Willie Pettawa, by bringing their “charms” to the house of the missionary. The following day, Money took the “great heap” of objects, burned them, and then scattered the ashes in a nearby swamp. An avid collector of Native “curios,” Money very likely first examined the artifacts to see if any were worth preserving. It is possible that he put some aside, as he did at a similar purge of “charms” that occurred near the mission headquarters at the Ubir-speaking village of Wanigela around the same time (Wetherell 1977:177). If so, some of these objects may form part of a huge collection of Maisin and Ubir artifacts that Money gathered on behalf

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of the Australian Museum in Sydney between 1904 and 1908.

A small but significant portion of early ethnological collections came to museums in similar ways. Across Oceania, converts marked their acceptance of Christianity by desecrating spiritual places and objects. By defying the taboos of sacred groves in Malaita or exposing cult objects to women and uninitiated men on the south coast of Papua, Christians sought to demonstrate the superior power of their newly found god and, very likely, to reduce the chances of the ancestors retaliating for their heresy. Often encouraged by missionaries, the new zealots engaged in orgies of destruction. But some objects survived, put aside by missionaries to be used as teaching devices on fund-raising tours or to be sold to collectors and museums (Lawson 1994). The same thing happened elsewhere in the indigenous world. In British Columbia, for instance, the Methodist missionary Thomas Crosby amassed a huge collection of masks, rattles, and totem poles in part salvaged from the purges that he helped to initiate in the first place (Cole 1985).

In the current climate in which museum collections have come to be viewed by many "as the last colonial captives, and field collecting purely as their abduction" (O'Hanlon and Welsh 2000:1), it is difficult to resist the conclusion that missionaries instigated such acts of cultural vandalism in part to grab artifacts for their own purposes. No doubt some did, but Money at least was obviously surprised by the Maisin initiative in 1903. He saw the purge as a hopeful sign, as an indication that the mere mention of Christianity had moved people to "cast witchcraft from them" (Money 1903*a*). Eighty years later, I interpreted this episode in a slightly different way, colored in no small part by my experience with the drum. It seemed to me that Money provided (and later I provided) Maisin with a convenient means of eliminating troublesome—indeed, deadly—objects. If so, this would fit a pattern reported for New Ireland and other areas in Melanesia. In these societies, people used to destroy sacred objects immediately after the ceremonies for which they were manufactured. For many

years now, they have instead sold or given them to tourists and artifact collectors, a more rewarding but equally efficient means of destruction (Kuchler 1987).

Events such as these remind us rather forcibly of an elementary fact: objects hold meanings within encompassing cultural systems. The meanings people bring to and see in objects guide the ways they construct, use, and dispose of them. These meaningful objects, in turn, partly shape the interactions local people have with outsiders, including collectors. In indirect ways—but sometimes very obviously as when a people purge artifacts they now see as dangerous—indigenous meanings shape a museum collection as much as the preferences of the collector or the contingencies of the moment of collecting. Until recently, students of museum ethnological collections paid little attention to the agency of the local peoples who made the objects and gave them up. Once they enter the museum, the objects themselves are largely silent about their origins and the conditions of their exchange. But, although obscured, the various originating meanings of the objects are not entirely lost. There are clues in the documentation of collecting and in the composition of collections themselves. And further insights can be gained through ethnographic research with the descendants of the original contributors.

This article is an initial attempt to survey the ways Maisin have understood and deployed objects of their material culture over the course of a century of interactions with European outsiders. I focus here in particular upon two overlapping groups of objects: those Maisin regard as emblems of identity and those they see as dangerous, as the materials of sorcery. The article presents "snapshots" of Maisin attitudes toward material culture at two points of time, drawing upon different kinds of evidence. In the first section, I investigate Money's collecting for the Australian Museum in the early years of the twentieth century for clues about indigenous attitudes. I then turn to the last 20 years, from the start of my fieldwork with the Maisin in 1981, to provide a rough categorization of how Maisin see, use, and exchange items of

material culture today. As the vignettes that open this article suggest, there are some striking continuities between the past and the present. I argue, however, that an examination of emblems and dangerous objects clearly demonstrates that Maisin attitudes toward material objects have been strongly influenced by their interactions with outsiders. This dialogue, carried out largely through the action of material exchanges, has informed and continues to influence the ways Maisin categorize objects and the objects they categorize.

#### AN INITIAL INVENTORY: MR. MONEY MAKES A COLLECTION

As in many parts of Melanesia, Europeans and Maisin established a relationship by exchanging gifts. On 29 July 1890, the Anglican missionary Albert Maclaren stepped ashore with William MacGregor, the administrator of British New Guinea, near a large village in Collingwood Bay, most likely Uiaku. They had been warned as they made their way up the coast in the government steamer that the Maisin were fierce warriors. But they received a warm welcome. No women or children were to be seen, but several men signaled from the water's edge for them to come ashore while others climbed palms to get coconuts for refreshments. As they came up, a man they took to be the chief greeted them. He was grasping a large dog by the hind legs, which he swung over his head and dashed to death before the startled visitors. The villagers showed no interest in tobacco or iron, but happily accepted red cloth and beads. In return, the Europeans asked for and received several "good curios" (Synge 1908:98).

Over the next decade, missionaries and government officers were able to pay only fleeting visits to the Maisin. In 1898, the Anglicans established a district headquarters at Wanigela, just to the north of the Maisin territory. Two years later, the administration built a government station at Tufi at the head of the bay. At the beginning of 1901, the resident magistrate ordered his police to open fire upon Maisin villagers after learning of a planned, but aborted, ambush upon a gov-

ernment patrol. In the fracas, the police shot dead at least three men, effectively bringing an end to the Maisin's ability to raid their neighbors. Less than a year later, a newly arrived Anglican missionary approached the Maisin in Uiaku to see if they would allow him to construct a church and school there.

Very little is known about Percy John Money. This is unfortunate, because the record from his decade serving the Anglican Mission in New Guinea reveals him as a remarkably talented individual. This working-class Australian layman fit the manly ideal that the first bishop of the mission, John Montague Stone-Wigg, sought to foster. As a "boxer, football coach, winner of bicycle races, and performer on the parallel bar, [Money] was regarded as ideal for New Guinea's climate and topography" (Wetherell 1977:59). Trained as a draftsman (Bonshek 1989:24), Money immediately went to work rebuilding the district station at Wanigela upon his arrival in June 1901. Within a year, he was supervising the establishment of the first mission station among the Maisin, optimistically constructing a huge church capable of seating 550 people as well as a commodious school and dormitory (Money 1903*b*). He did this and more with next to no financial resources, using bush materials for the buildings and relying upon small gifts of tobacco and personal charm to recruit labor.

Although Money did not hesitate to condemn aspects of Maisin life that he considered un-Christian, his reports and letters reveal a real affection toward the people. He learned both Ubir, the language spoken around Wanigela, and Maisin, translating the liturgy and some hymns into both languages. Up until 1907, he was the only resident missionary in Collingwood Bay, spending much of his time with the local peoples. He had more-troubled relations with the mission, picking several fights with the bishop and firmly refusing to be ordained a priest (Barker 1987). Money suffered terribly from both dengue fever and malaria, and this probably more than anything else led him to leave Papua permanently in 1910, a year after marrying Annie Ker, another lay missionary.

In 1904, Money wrote to the Australian

Museum to offer his services in building up a collection from Collingwood Bay (Figure 1). Although Europeans had entered the area only 14 years previously and the Maisin had submitted to government control only in January 1901, Money still felt that "civilizing influences are at work [and] much that is interesting about the natives of this part may soon be lost" (quoted in Bonshek 1989:19). In 1904 alone, Money sent some 238 objects to the museum, giving brief descriptions of their functions and including their names in both the Ubir and Maisin languages. The museum register records very large contributions each year from 1905 to 1908, with periodic small donations after Money left Papua. Money's wife made a final large donation, numbering over 100 items, in 1934. Large as this collection is, it formed only a portion of Money's overall collecting activity. The bishop directed Money to collect on behalf of the mission, and it is clear that Money held on to many items himself and may have sold them to other museums upon his retirement.

The Money Collection is remarkable in several ways besides its size. The first thing to note is that most of the collection comes from a single culture area, rather than covering a wide geographic range, which was more common for the time. Parts of the collection, especially the initial contribution, are relatively well documented for the time (a fact that made it much easier for me to obtain further information from Maisin in 1982–1983). The collection, as we shall see, is quite broad in scope. Finally, Money greatly enhanced the collection by providing a series of excellent photographs of native life, many of which featured the kinds of artifacts he collected (Auld 1984). (According to Bonshek [1989:23], Money also sent manuscripts to the museum, probably stories. These appear to have been lost.)

Unfortunately, there are few clues as to how Money went about collecting items or of the Maisin's reactions to his work. We find some suggestions in a few documents and in the composition of the collection itself. Money almost certainly purchased most of the items directly, probably with small gifts of tobacco and trade goods because the Ubir

and Maisin would not have been familiar with the use of money at that early date. Most of the objects are not exceptional; they are artifacts that would have been in regular use in the society (everyday clothing, tools, basic body decorations, toys, hunting and fishing equipment, and, especially, pots and pot fragments). Money may have obtained some items that otherwise would have been discarded, such as the elaborate costumes worn by widows and widowers while in mourning. Most of the items would have been in regular use. Collingwood Bay people, however, appear to have rapidly accepted steel axes. Money complained in one letter that he was finding it difficult to find axes and was only able to send two to Sydney (Money 1905).

A small but still significant proportion of the collection is composed of items that Maisin today would recognize as important in terms of cultural heritage or as simply "old." These include some elaborate headdresses, stone lime sticks, large lime gourds, and a variety of shell and feather ornaments that Money identified as being restricted to "chiefs." A few of these items may have come Money's way through the sorcery purge of 1903. The mission Annual Report of 1902–1903 relates that Money requested to keep certain carved figures as "curios" when men from Wanigela decided to destroy them. He received their permission to do so (Wetherell 1977:177). Elsewhere, Money complained that he was not able to obtain certain valuables even at "high prices." "They have some things which they will not part with even though you offer a fabulous price—they are heirlooms" (Money 1905). This almost certainly included tapas decorated with clan designs. The Money Collection includes only a few of these, all from Wanigela. Money certainly would have been aware of the significance of these tapas. I read the absence of clan tapas from Uiaku as evidence that the Maisin were unwilling to part with them.

I expect that Money did try to explain museums to his Ubir and Maisin suppliers, but it is very unlikely that the latter had more than the dimmest idea of what he was talking about. What were their own motivations for supplying so many things? What were their



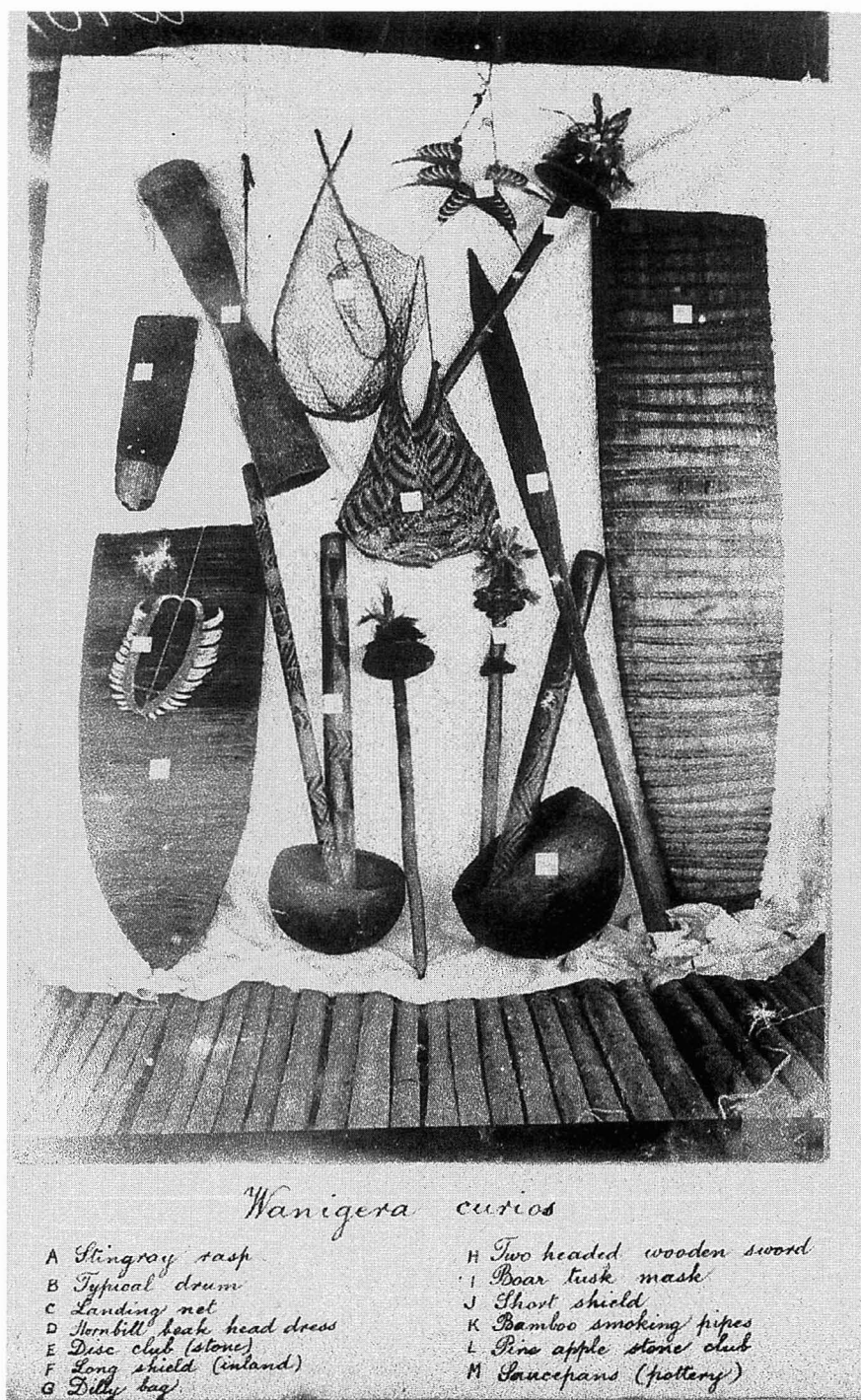


FIGURE 1. Artifacts from Collingwood Bay. Photograph by Percy John Money, ca. 1902–1909. Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, Sydney, Australia.

expectations? Many of the more ordinary items, the bulk of the Money Collection, they were probably happy enough to sell or trade for the goods Money offered. Present-day attitudes and the letter just cited suggest that cultural heirlooms were a different matter. Perhaps when they handed these over to Money, the Maisin and the Ubir supposed they were cementing a relationship with the missionary, creating an obligation they expected to be reciprocated in the future. As we have seen, the Maisin and the Ubir also took advantage of the presence of the missionary—a powerful, neutral outsider—to rid their villages of dangerous objects that they feared were used in sorcery. Most of those objects were destroyed, but some undoubtedly were rescued by the missionary and later sold to museums.

There were no doubt other motivations as well. We know about the ones I have listed because the same or similar motivations exist today and because of documentary evidence that they were operating at the time of early contact. Does this confirm that present-day attitudes are “cultural” in the sense of being more or less impervious to the influences of history? I do not think so, at least not entirely. Certainly the logic of reciprocity is deeply entrenched in all Melanesian societies. Maisin attitudes toward valued objects and their exchange parallel similar attitudes that, for instance, Trobriand Islanders hold about *kula* trade objects or Melpa tribesmen in the Central Highlands express concerning the huge *moka* exchanges (Strathern 1989, Weiner 1992). There is abundant evidence showing that Melanesians have adjusted exchange activities to the challenges and opportunity of colonialism rather than abandoning them (Gregory 1982). In the case of Collingwood Bay, pacification after the establishment of a district government station in 1900 reduced and soon eliminated one of the major venues in which people exchanged artifacts designating their cultural identities—intertribal feasts used for ending warfare and building new alliances. Perhaps the Maisin and their neighbors regarded the Europeans as new alliances on par with or superior to their traditional enemies and so did the appropriate thing, al-

though always cautiously, by giving them cultural heirlooms from time to time. They may have even felt that these investments earned some return. After all, Money did build an impressive set of buildings in Wanigela and Uiaku and prepared the first converts. My older informants in the early 1980s remembered his name with fondness, whereas no one could recall the name of his immediate successor.

We are on firmer ground when we consider the possible interactions between colonial agents and indigenous assumptions about dangerous objects. Money was taken by surprise in 1903 when local people volunteered their “charms” for destruction. But by supporting the action, he reinforced the logic behind it and added the church’s authority. In 1920, 1932–1933, 1949, and likely other occasions as well, successive missionaries approved and participated in sorcery purges. In all cases, these were initiated by members of the Maisin community, but the presence of the missionaries—and behind them the authority of the Christian god—were critical. Only by drawing upon the superior power represented by the mission could the local leaders of these purges hope to overcome the power of the sorcerers. Ironically, in 1982 I found myself rescuing the drum used by the leader of the 1932–1933 purge from a later attempt to rid the villages of dangerous objects. Money’s hopes in 1903 proved extravagant. The purges did not mark a breaking away from old attitudes as much as practical attempts to deal with present threats. Purges reduced fears about sorcery, but only temporarily. Over the long term, they have tended to confirm beliefs in sorcery. They have also reinforced a notion of Christianity as a superior magical force with which to police sorcery, not as a new worldview in which sorcery has no part (Barker 1990). Finally, the purges have resulted in the physical destruction of untold numbers of objects, for no outside observers after Money made any attempt to rescue the “charms” from the flames.

But what kinds of objects were actually destroyed in these early purges? The evidence suggests that the purged objects included very few of the kinds of things that would have appealed to Money as a museum

collector; otherwise he would have made an effort—as he did in the Wanigela case—to acquire them. (It is possible, of course, that Money did not report saving objects that the Maisin had meant to destroy. But, given his willingness to report on the Wanigela case and the general fact that he and other missionaries saw nothing wrong in collecting, it is hard to see his motivation for doing so.) Fortunately, a resident magistrate provided direct evidence of the contents of a purge. In early April 1936, village councilors in Uiaku presented R. M. Cridland with the hard evidence, as they saw it, of rampaging sorcery. What Mr. Cridland saw, however, was “an assortment of tins, bottles and packets, all of which I was assured contained poison” (Cridland 1936). Upon interviewing the owners, Cridland assured himself (if not the councilors) that the materials were actually magical charms for gardening, hunting, rain-making, and attracting women, “all quite harmless in themselves and a necessary part of native life.” One man admitted to keeping magic that he planned to use in payback for the death of his wife. Cridland confiscated this and returned the rest. There is no indication that any of this material was feared because it was old, because it had belonged to a powerful ancestor. Indeed, Cridland’s report backs up claims made by elderly informants in the 1980s that in the past sorcerers relied heavily on the use of poisons. It was hard to get rid of sorcery because sorcerers found it easy to replenish their stock of malicious magic following a purge (Barker 1983).

#### THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF CONTEMPORARY MAISIN SOCIETY: A SURVEY

Today numbering around 3000 people, the Maisin occupy four village clusters along the southern shores of Collingwood Bay on the eastern edge of Oro Province. The villages are divided into contiguous hamlets owned by patrilineally related men who share rights to certain lands for gardening. The local economy remains essentially subsistence-based. All villagers make gardens; most men hunt and fish; and most women gather wild foods

from the forests and swamps. With the exception of painted bark cloth (*tapa*), Maisin have had little success finding products to sell to outside markets. Still, they are well off by rural standards. Perhaps as many as a thousand Maisin have left the villages in the past 30 years to complete their education in distant high schools and to take up jobs, mostly in urban centers. Their remittances of manufactured objects and money provide a major subsidy to the local economy (Barker 1996).

Maisin villages exert a kind of magic over first-time European visitors. Upon seeing Uiaku, an early missionary gushed: “for the first time in New Guinea I saw what I had hoped and expected to see—large villages and crowds of natives, dressed beautifully in native fashion, and with nothing of the semi-civilised shabbiness that had offended me in Samarai: tropical jungle behind the houses, betel-nut palms and granadillas and crotons and dracaenas and limes all about the station; and, as background to everything, and not so very far away, the splendour of the mountains, towering golden against the sky, and such as I had never seen before except in picture-books or dreams” (Chignell 1911:17). Maisin today wear Western clothing, except on ceremonial occasions, but the villages still retain a pristine and traditional appearance. Brown and gray bush houses, surrounded by stands of fruit trees, flowers, betel and coconut palms, front long, sandy plazas. Outrigger canoes of all sizes, lining the beaches, complete the picture of a “traditional” society in harmony with the surrounding environment.

Visitors today react to the village charm of Uiaku much as Chignell did. But the “traditional” appearance of the villages owes more to their isolation from urban centers and markets than adherence to the ancestral past. The Maisin have been in continual contact with outsiders for a century, and that interaction has deeply transformed the society. There has been a school and church operating in Uiaku since 1902. All Maisin are at least second-generation Christians. Virtually everyone can speak some English and many people under the age of 50 are fluent. Most people have visited and lived for a time in urban areas. Some go to work and others to

visit working relatives. People now depend upon money to supplement local food, to purchase tobacco, to pay school fees, and to support the priest. Imported items and fashions quietly insinuate their way into village life. Over the past 20 years, for instance, the Maisin have expanded their cuisine dramatically by importing new crops and new methods of preparing foods from different parts of the country. Some younger Maisin are refashioning their houses to match urban styles. They build larger houses, with more windows, interior rooms, and prominent front doors (with locks). Where there is sufficient space, they place their houses in compounds, separated from other houses in the same hamlet by expanses of lawn and gardens, the boundaries marked with hedges and fences. These are still "bush" houses, and a man continues to follow tradition by building only in his own patri-clan's land. They are artifacts of "neo-tradition": adaptations of indigenous norms to modern conditions.

Much of Maisin culture, material and ideological, could be described as neo-traditional. The Maisin can only imagine the world of their precolonial ancestors and their imaginings, inevitably, take on colorations from their present-day experiences and assumptions. Take, for instance, the elaborate body decorations used for ceremonial dancing. Maisin will tell you that key elements of costume—particularly tapa cloth designs and certain combinations of shell decoration—have remained unchanged from the time of creation. A person has more flexibility in creating his or her other decorations, from headdresses to the arrangement of fragrant leaves and herbs in arm and leg rings. Yet the effect should be to replicate the image of the ancestor as he or she emerged from beneath the earth at the dawn of time. The individual impersonates the founding ancestor of their patri-clan, surely a strong enactment of "timeless" tradition.

But context as much as content defines dance costumes and ceremonial dancing. Early in this century, Maisin decorated themselves and danced to mark initiation ceremonies for firstborn children or to celebrate intertribal feasts. In the years following

World War II, Maisin redefined themselves as Christians and church days became the main occasions for ceremonial dancing. These were still largely village-based occasions, usually seen by no outsiders other than the occasional bishop on patrol. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the context changed again. Local leaders took a very public stand against commercial logging on their lands, forging strategic alliances with a number of national and international environmental organizations. Since that time, a small but steady stream of foreign environmental activists, museum curators interested in tapa cloth, and film crews has visited the Maisin. Visits from dignitaries, such as the Greenpeace flagship *Rainbow Warrior* in 1997, now provide the main occasions for taking feathers and shells out of storage and dancing. The costumes have not changed much over the past 20 years and still connote to the Maisin eternal clan identities. But clearly the dances have also come to communicate a sense of a common Maisin identity tied, until recently at least, to Christianity and increasingly today to a sense of common ownership of the land.

I draw from these observations (which I elaborate upon below) three basic points that guide the rest of my discussion. First, I assume that people bring meanings to artifacts and not the other way around. The meanings that people perceive in objects result from historically situated cultural assumptions and contingent arguments. Second, I assume that Maisin, like most of us, tend to think along opposite lines—that meaning resides in artifacts. The more culturally significant an artifact is deemed to be, the more it will be seen as a singular expression of its own inherent meaning, free from the taint of outside influences or contingencies. By the same token, they tend to assume that artifacts clearly influenced by noncultural forces are less authentic, less eternal. Finally, I assume that Maisin understandings of artifacts that they consider culturally significant have been molded and transformed in a century of interactions with outsiders, many who also regarded the same artifacts as significant, although not always for the same reasons. (Anne Marie Tietjen and I have drawn upon



the same insights in an assessment of women's facial tattooing [Barker and Tietjen 1990].)

The remainder of this section provides a survey of material culture in Maisin society along a continuum from the least symbolic of Maisin identity to the most. As we shall see, many Maisin believe that they are experiencing a crisis in retaining their cultural identity. This survey will give us a better grasp of what they mean by this.

Maisin material culture today can be divided, rather crudely to be sure, into four broad categories: Western imports, ordinary indigenous objects, heritage objects, and personal heirlooms. I provide these categories—indeed, the idea of the continuum—myself. Maisin do not speak of their material culture in this way. In fact, they do not talk of “material culture” as a category at all. All the same, I believe that villagers’ deployment of objects suggests that such distinctions are at work.

### *Western Imported Objects*

Maisin today purchase many of the objects they use in everyday life from local stores or receive them as remittances from working relatives. A considerable portion of the material culture is made up of imported objects and has increased noticeably over the past two decades. Maisin adopted many objects generations ago, such as steel axes, tobacco, and sugar. People's ability to purchase manufactured objects, however, was very limited up until the early 1960s, when the first high school graduates began to land well-paying jobs in the towns and to send regular gifts of money and goods home to their relations. I'm told that this is the time that Maisin gave up tapa cloth for Western clothing for their daily wear and replaced handmade fishing nets with nylon ones. Many items simply replaced indigenous counterparts. Through the 1980s to the present, for instance, Maisin have gradually added steel pots to their kitchens (retaining clay pots for feasts). (Maisin do not make cooking pots themselves but trade tapa cloth for them with their neighbors, at Wanigela, to the north [Egloff 1979].) Other

items, however, are very new and reflect a growing prosperity in the villages. These include radios, guitars, dinghies with outboard motors, and, very recently, generators and solar-powered lights. Although Maisin generally recognize items such as manufactured clothing as originating in outside European culture, they are fully accepted. Indeed, there are now few Maisin living who can remember a time when most people wore tapa cloth daily.

In the early stages, villagers tended to adjust their uses of imported objects to local cultural practices and values. Maisin played soccer, which the colonial administration introduced in the 1920s, for instance, according to their received rules governing raiding and warfare. (It was widely believed by Europeans at the time that the suppression of warfare had taken the zest out of life for Papuans and threatened their survival. The missions and colonial administration deliberately introduced cricket and soccer as substitutes [Wetherell 1977:105–115].) Players prepared themselves through the use of magic and by avoiding sex (which they feared would weaken them), and teams sought to retain balanced scores. Similarly, villagers in the 1980s put a lot of pressure upon neighbors receiving gifts from working relatives to share them. A man bringing a suitcase of used clothing to relatives, for instance, could expect to see items of apparel quickly dispersed along exchange networks so that no one family could accumulate many things. Several men told me in the early 1980s that their working sons wanted to purchase iron roofs for their village houses. They did not dare to take them up on this offer, fearing that the fancy roofs would provoke their envious neighbors to practice sorcery.

Values of reciprocity, of sharing, and of equality remain very important in Maisin society, but as a greater variety of commodities have become available inequalities have grown steadily and become harder to ignore. Maisin who have returned to the villages in recent years often keep goods they accumulated while in town, sometimes using them to start small businesses. Others are affecting somewhat more bourgeois lifestyles focused



upon the nuclear family. Most Maisin households, for instance, began regularly using plates and cutlery in the 1990s. By the late 1990s, the feasts I enjoyed a decade earlier—with food spread out on banana leaves for all to share—had become a memory. Even at feasts, people ate food taken from pots and eaten on plates, all marked with the names of the nuclear family owners. As Robert Foster, amongst others, has noted, the vast increase in advertising and growing availability of cheap commodities is proving a very potent source of cultural change in village society (Foster 1995).

### *Ordinary Indigenous Objects*

Maisin still make many things for their own use from local resources. The most visible include houses and outrigger canoes, made by men, and pandanus mats and tapa cloth, made by women. Villagers have improved upon these products over the years, adjusting designs according to shifts in popular fashions and incorporating mass-manufactured materials where useful. For instance, men now use nails (and hammers) when they can get them to attach rafters to house posts, preferring this over the more laborious method of lashing them together with rattan; women have turned to commercial dyes to decorate string bags and mats; and men tip hunting and fishing spears with sharpened steel. All the same, Maisin regard these products as their own. Individuals take pride in their ability to make them, but otherwise the objects have no special significance.

People are keenly aware that they make fewer things than they used to. Adults recall the ingenious bird, fish, and pig traps that their parents once made, but the shotgun has rendered such technical knowledge superfluous. Occasionally an elderly person will make a trap to show to youngsters, often at the request of the community school in programs meant to teach about culture, but today most people have no idea how to make such things. No doubt a great deal of practical knowledge has disappeared since Money lived with the Maisin. I very much doubt, for instance, whether any Maisin today would recognize

the children's toys or musical instruments that form part of the Australian Museum collection.

Before contact, Maisin traded with most of their neighbors (Seligman and Joyce 1907). Such trade continues today in a diminished form. Maisin import clay cooking pots, large seagoing canoes, shells, feathers, and pigs from neighboring language groups. Today, people often pay cash for these things rather than items of traditional exchange such as tapa cloth. Many Maisin are also taking advantage of a burgeoning national market in "traditional" artifacts. In the late 1990s, there were noticeably more string bags, carved lime spatulas, and shell ornaments in the village than a decade earlier. Villagers purchased these in urban centers. Few villagers make them any more.

There is one important exception to this picture of decline in local manufacture: tapa cloth. Up until the 1960s, most people living in Oro Province put on painted bark cloth for daily wear and they still don it as part of their decorations for ceremonial occasions. By the 1950s the Maisin had already gained a reputation for designing the finest tapa in the country. Twenty years later, Maisin regularly provided artifact stores in the towns with supplies of tapa. A missionary nurse at Wanigela around that time sought out further outlets in the country and abroad, increasing the market. By the early 1980s, Maisin had developed a speciality in the national artifact market as tapa makers and most families enjoyed a small but welcome inflow of cash from the product. Like other Papua New Guineans, who gradually became the largest purchasers of Maisin tapa, the Maisin continued to use the cloth as part of their traditional self-decoration. In part because it could easily be converted into cash, tapa became a major item in ceremonial exchanges among the Maisin, particularly bride wealth payments.

Until the mid-1980s, only women—and virtually all of them—made tapa. Maisin took pride in their growing reputation, but they did not regard the cloth as a special type of product. Attitudes are now changing in large part as the direct result of partnerships be-

tween the Maisin and foreign environmental activists (discussed in more detail later in this section). During the 1990s, volunteers from Greenpeace and the Peace Corps began an aggressive campaign to expand the market for tapa within Papua New Guinea and overseas. Tapa held two attractions for the outsiders. First, it appealed as an environmentally friendly alternative to commercial logging and plantation development. Second, women made it; and women, at that time, had become a major target for support. The volunteers' efforts had some striking short-term results. Tapa is now marketed in the United States and Australia in several ethnic art catalogs and to the world via the Internet. Several delegations of Maisin have toured and hosted exhibits of tapa in the United States and Japan. At home, some Maisin have begun to call themselves "artists." The women, who are making more tapa than ever, have been joined by a handful of men who discovered the art of drawing designs (although they tend to leave the more boring and laborious job of beating bark into cloth to the women). Finally, an increasing number of Maisin are seeing tapa as something more than an ordinary, if commercially valuable, indigenous product. They see it as a symbol of Maisin identity itself.

### *Heritage Artifacts*

Villagers also continually produce heritage artifacts, but they are seen as uniquely cultural—as symbolizing history and identity. Such artifacts include tapa cloth, body decorations, certain types of lime spatulas and lime pots, and elements of house and canoe design. More accurately, things like tapa, the human body, and houses are media for the reproduction of memorized patterns that Maisin consider to be eternal. According to the common origin story, at the beginning of time the Maisin ancestors emerged from under the ground at a site about 75 km to the west of the current Maisin villages. They came up one clan at a time. Each clan wore distinctive decorative designs including tapa designs and arrangements of shell ornaments. They also arrived on the surface with certain

ritual prerogatives, rights to particular songs and sometimes stories. Maisin have ever since put on these *evovi* (clan emblems), thus impersonating their ancestors, during ceremonial moments, particularly for life crisis ceremonies (initiations for firstborn children and death rituals) and in formal exchanges with other tribes. The vehicles for the *evovi*—cloth, bodies, houses—are temporary. The patterns are eternal.

That is, they are eternal so long as people remember them and reproduce them. The course of a century of colonial and post-colonial interactions has seen such occasions both constrained and transformed, leading in turn to transformations in the material expression of the memory culture. To begin with, there has been steady erosion in village-based occasions during which clan *evovi* must be reproduced and displayed. This has been going on for some time. Up until the disruptions of World War II, for instance, leading men periodically sponsored intertribal feasts marked by huge food exchanges and weeks of ceremonial dancing. To mark the occasion, the sponsoring clan would construct a special house placed in the center of its own hamlet plaza. The house embodied the essence of the clan, marked by special carvings, by the particular design of the walls and roof, and by the type of materials used only in its own construction. The house had a singular presence during feasts. No one could enter it. Food had to be covered when brought past it. And as soon as the feast concluded, the house had to be dismantled and its components quietly discarded in a secret place in the bush. The last of these *karwo va* ("chief houses") was built in the late 1930s. Only a few very elderly Maisin alive today ever saw one.

The constriction of village-based ceremonial occasions has continued into the present. Up until the 1970s, initiation ceremonies for firstborn children provided the most important occasion for the reproduction and display of clan identities. On these occasions, the mother's brothers of the firstborn child presented him or her with some of their own clan property for his or her exclusive use. Beginning in the 1960s, however, virtually all male adolescents and, by the 1970s, all female



FIGURE 2. Ceremonial dancing in Yuayu village, 1997. Note the distinctive clan designs (*evovi*) on the women's tapa skirts. Photograph by the author.

as well left the villages to attend the high schools that had recently opened elsewhere in the country. Initiations were at first delayed and then, after the young people got married and settled into jobs in town, abandoned completely. Today a firstborn initiation is a rare event. It requires considerable organization (and determination!) on the part of the sponsoring families. Ironically, the largest initiations tend to be sponsored by town-based families who can bypass extensive negotiations with village kin by paying directly for the major costs of the necessary exchanges. The less elaborate puberty ceremonies for girls, during which senior women create exquisite facial tattoos, had also become rare by the 1980s and then ceased altogether.

Today, end of mourning ceremonies (*roi babasi*) provide the most regular "traditional" occasion during which people recreate and witness clan *evovi*. At the heart of the ceremony, the person or persons mourning a

recently deceased individual are bathed and then clothed and decorated in their traditional costumes by their affines. These ceremonies tend to be rather constrained, with only the person in mourning wearing traditional dress. A few wealthier families, however, will use the occasion of the end of mourning ceremony to sponsor larger celebrations that may include lavish outlays of food and days of dancing. It is interesting that most villagers regard these large ceremonies with mixed feelings. They enjoy them, and yet they point out that they break with Maisin tradition. They claim that end of mourning celebrations should be more modest and tend to resent the fact that only some families have the wealth and connections to mount large celebrations (Barker 1985).

Ironically, Maisin are donning traditional costumes far more often in recent years than they have for a long while (Figure 2). As mentioned earlier, up to the 1980s, church

festivals provided the main occasion and venues for displays of memory culture. From the mid-1990s on, most of the big moments have been welcoming ceremonies and feasts for visiting environmental activists and filmmakers. The Maisin's growing celebrity in Papua New Guinea is the result of a number of factors, the most important of which has been the steady opposition of most of the local population to a series of development schemes all of which would entail the clear-cutting of the rain forest that forms the hinterland of the Maisin territory. There are other attractions as well. The Maisin are as a group very well educated by rural standards and enjoy the advantage of good contacts in the towns. This eases access for environmental organizations, most of which work out of Port Moresby, who can consult with Maisin in town and work in English while in the villages. The villages are relatively easy to get to from Port Moresby and yet, as we have seen, hold an enticing ambience of distanced "tradition." Finally, and certainly not least, the Maisin have an environmentally friendly product that serves the purpose, in activist propaganda if not entirely in reality, of providing an economic alternative to logging. Maisin women make extremely attractive tapa cloth—a product that can be marketed easily in Papua New Guinea and abroad.

Since 1995, small delegations of Maisin men and women have carried the joint message of rain forest conservation and tapa cloth to museum exhibits, talk circuits, and ethnic arts businesses in the United States, Australia, and Japan. There has been a steady stream of visitors to the villages, many to work with the Maisin on a variety of projects and many just to visit. The Maisin welcome the most important visitor-benefactors with celebrations featuring traditional dancing. In August of 1997, for instance, the Maisin staged a 3-day party of dancing and feasting to welcome the Greenpeace flagship, the *Rainbow Warrior*, to their waters. In a 12-month period in 1999 and 2000, three different film groups arrived to document "the Maisin story." The world audience of CNN learned about the Maisin desire to conserve their rain forest to a background of drumming and dancing. (The

other two organizations represented the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which included the Maisin in an extended news program on logging in Papua New Guinea, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, which will in 2001 air an hour-long documentary on the visit of a group of Canadian aboriginals to the Maisin.)

Even as the Maisin find new encouragement and occasions to reproduce and display their cultural heritage, the memory basis of cultural reproduction is both eroded and transformed. Until recently, the heritage symbolized in cultural artifacts was the heritage of the different clans that emerged from beneath the ground at the time of creation. The contemporary occasions for performance reduce the salience of clan identity, substituting a conception of a merged Maisin cultural identity. Even as they perform more frequently and make ever more tapa, older villagers note that the young people are forgetting clan-owned tapa designs among other things. And they worry that, pressed to make larger quantities of tapa, women (and increasingly men) borrow design ideas from outside, breaking with the received repertoire of design elements. Dance and tapa increasingly represent general Maisin cultural identity, even as memory of clan identity fades.

### *Heirlooms*

Maisin retain few objects in their households older than 10 years or so. For most objects, this is the inevitable consequence of living in the wet Tropics. Tapa cloths, for example, quickly fade if exposed to light. Even when kept in a suitcase, tapa dyes bleach out after 5 years or so and the fibers of the cloth dry, stretch, and become brittle. Family Bibles and old photographs and other paper treasures may be destroyed by any number of common foes—water, mold, or paper-eating insects. The old artifacts that Maisin do keep tend to be made of harder stuff—wood, shell, and stone. They were made by men and protected by men. Their male guardians regard them as heirlooms, as memories of the fathers, uncles, and grandfathers who once used them.

The most common artifacts are drums and

shell ornaments, kept in good repair to be used on ceremonial occasions calling for self-decoration and dancing. Many men also keep an old war club or spears inherited from their father hidden away in the rafters of their houses. A few individuals keep and occasionally use old lime pots and spatulas. These tend to be relatively large and are associated, at least in the minds of their current owners, with powerful leaders of old. (Old lime spatulas [often made of stone] and a few other objects tend to be clan *evovi*. Their holders act as custodians of the clan. As far as I am aware, campaigners have not included old clan *evovi* in their sorcery purges.) These are the most common artifacts and the ones that owners bring into public view on ceremonial occasions. But some Maisin own, or are suspected of owning, other old artifacts that they show only to the closest kin. These include oddly shaped rocks, used in garden magic, ancient stone axes, and a variety of personal artifacts inherited from particular ancestors.

Owners treat heirlooms with the greatest care and, on appropriate occasions, wear and use them in public with pride. The heirlooms confirm a person's links to the ancestral past and, thus, his present-day importance. Memory in the form of an object is a powerful thing. But Maisin regard these kinds of artifacts as possessing a power in their own right, by virtue of their association with ancestors. Much as they treasure their heirlooms, the ancestral power of the objects periodically compels their owners to give them away or to destroy them. Although it is impossible to estimate the size of the pool of old objects in Maisin society, because many are held secretly, it is certainly small and shrinking rapidly as individuals deal with increasing enticements and pressures to rid themselves of them.

Some anthropologists describe heirlooms in Melanesian societies as "inalienable" in recognition of the intrinsic link between their possessors and the ancestors who originally made and used them (Weiner 1992). Such links do not so much prevent owners from giving these objects away as increase their value and significance and thus the act of giving itself. Owners would not think of sell-

ing heirlooms, but they will give them as a gift to others when they feel the need to create a significant and lasting tie. The gift, at least in the eyes of the given, creates an inherent bond to the receiver. In the past, an owner might give a prized heirloom to his sister's firstborn son or daughter at the time of his or her initiation or to a former enemy to cement a new relationship. Today, owners give heirlooms—especially old dancing decorations—to the European outsiders who visit their villages. In June 2000, I watched with interest and a little dismay as two members of a Canadian First Nation delegation I had brought to the Maisin villages received heirlooms. My 12-year-old son also received an old pig tusk ornament from his (fictive) mother's father. The givers in these cases intend to cement exchange relationships, but because of the tremendous distances between the village and the homes of the receivers—measured both geographically and culturally—this cannot be guaranteed and the effect is to drain the villages of a few more old things.

Imbued with the power of the ancestors, heirlooms make powerful gifts. Maisin fear that the same association makes them deadly tools for sorcerers. Maisin presume that men can and do use old things to communicate with ancestors both to help them out in positive ways—by increasing garden fertility or luck in hunting, for instance—and to harm enemies by making them sick or causing accidents. When people become alarmed over the rate of sickness and death in their communities, they may work up enough courage to directly confront the men they suspect of sorcery. Those men, as we saw in the vignette that opened this article, may then expose and destroy the old objects in their possession to publicly demonstrate their innocence. The most recent instance occurred in early 1997, when a group belonging to an indigenous Anglican religious order, the Melanesian Brothers, made their way from house to house in the Maisin villages to demand that men bring out old things. Guided by younger villagers, they confronted only older men. The owners of heirlooms protested their innocence but most also handed over at least some of their heirlooms—mostly lime pots



and magic stones—to the Brothers, who took them away and, so I was told, threw them in a secret location in the sea. Some Maisin disagreed with the purge and at least one tried to stop it; but the action clearly enjoyed broad public support. It may be that as old objects become ever more rare, the public fears about those that remain will grow, hastening the outflow of objects either as gifts or through destruction.

#### DISCUSSION

This rough inventory of Maisin attitudes toward material objects during two periods suggests both continuities and changes. These can be summarized as follows:

(1) Maisin have lost much of their former self-reliance in the area of material culture. Gradually through the twentieth century and to a greatly accelerating extent in the 1990s, Maisin have turned to imports rather than making objects themselves. Most imports are mass-manufactured, but some key items such as string bags come from a growing national market in indigenous products.

(2) Tapa cloth provides the key exception to this trend. Even as they have abandoned local manufacturing of other objects, Maisin have greatly expanded their production of tapa to take advantage of a market niche in Papua New Guinea and overseas. The manufacturing process for tapa remains local and “low-tech.” The Maisin find or grow the raw materials for the cloth and dyes in the bush or garden and they use nothing more than muscle power to create the cloth. Still, commercial success is encouraging and sometimes forcing changes. I noted one here—the decision by some artistically gifted men to design cloth. There are others, such as a growing tendency to use fashion magazines to get design ideas, which I plan to examine in another article.

(3) There is a remarkable stability in the way that Maisin recognize and treat clan emblems. Reproduced in wood, stone, and, especially, on tapa cloth, these emblems represent for Maisin the eternal reality of a person’s clan identity. In Money’s day and today, Maisin regard these emblems as inalienable.

They are not to be sold and may only be passed outside the clan itself under extraordinary conditions, such as a firstborn child’s initiation, as a statement that the recipient has become at least in part a member of that clan, a participant in that identity.

(4) Although Maisin hold to the principle that clan emblems are inalienable, individually they have forgotten many specific clan emblems over the decades since contact. I have suggested that this is primarily due to the fact that clan identity has become less salient over time as Maisin have taken on new and more encompassing identities. Through much of the twentieth century, Maisin engaged in a long dialogue with Christianity, coming to see themselves as members of a universal religion in which clan identity has little relevance. In more recent years, the Maisin’s sense of who they are has been greatly influenced by interactions and joint projects carried out with an assortment of environmental activists, museum curators, and documentary filmmakers who wish to support the efforts of indigenous people to conserve the rain forest and protect “traditional” ways of life. This new arena of exchange encourages Maisin to retain knowledge of clan identity more than Christianity does; but mostly it supports a notion of a common “tribal” identity that may in time eclipse a person’s sense of membership in a specific clan.

(5) In the past as in the present, Maisin have feared particular objects, which they suspect to be used by sorcerers to cause sickness, accidents, and deaths. They have repeatedly turned to (and manipulated) outsiders to help them physically destroy or, in a few cases, remove dangerous objects from the community. These objects are things that individual men keep in secret in their homes and that must be publicly displayed to be destroyed.

(6) The type of things Maisin regard as dangerous appears to have changed over the years. In the past, villagers purged themselves of “poisons”—magical concoctions contained in bottles or wrapped in leaves. In more recent years, “old things”—personal heritage objects held by individuals—have become the

chief targets of sorcery purges. This change corresponds broadly with a shift in the way that Maisin believe sorcerers operate (Barker 1983, 1990). (As in most Melanesian societies, no one admits to actually practicing sorcery themselves.) In the old days, people say, one always knew who the sorcerers were. They were older men who refused to share their lime pots while chewing betel nut with others and who undertook dietary regimes, refusing certain foods that might "cool" their power. They were feared and respected men in the community, who usually used sorcery to punish those who had broken some public convention. They used "poisons"—a combination of deadly materials and spells—to attack their victims. During the colonial period, several of these old-time sorcerers converted to Christianity and gave up their powers, and others were exposed through the purges. According to these (obviously rather simple) accounts, sorcery did not disappear as hoped. Instead, younger men turned to a less visible but equally deadly means of spiritual attack by calling on the ghosts of their ancestors. A physical keepsake of the ancestor, Maisin believe, is very helpful to the sorcerer, if not essential. With this shift, some villagers began to refocus their efforts to purge the community of sorcery by exposing old objects rather than packages of poisons. Thus we find today that the owners of old things, while taking great pride in them, also face pressure from fearful neighbors to give them up.

Colonial agents are often accused, with much justice, of instilling self-hatred among the indigenous peoples they have ruled, converted, and employed (Fanon 1968). The Maisin attempt to destroy some of the most valuable and rare artifacts of their past could be read as an instance of this, with museums as indirect beneficiaries. This reading, however, is too simple. The Anglican missionaries did not, in fact, attack Maisin material culture; instead, they rhapsodized village life, as do the activists who regularly visit with the Maisin today. In the past, Maisin had no direct interactions with the Australian Museum. They did not know that things they made would be of interest to the outside world. This situation has changed in recent years, due to the direct

collaboration between Maisin and outside agencies, including museums. As these collaborations continue, Maisin attitudes toward their own material products will continue to shift and to develop. They will not return to what they once were. But there is little doubt that Maisin will, with the encouragement of interested outsiders, continue to define themselves in no small part in terms of the objects they produce and exchange.

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